

**“Living in the Unknown”**  
**Hol Hamoed Sukkot 5769**  
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Wow, what a grueling few weeks. There were so many highs and lows. First we had Rosh Hashanah and the excitement of the High Holiday season; setting the seats up, preparing the shul, and then the crowds coming. What a thrill for a rabbi! We also had two b'not mitzvah, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, and next came Yom Kippur and the exhaustion which often comes with truly facing life and death questions. On almost every page of the prayer book, it tells us who will live and who will die. Additionally, there were two funerals, one woman taken too early and one woman 99 years old. Again there was another bat mitzvah, the incredibly joyous holiday of Sukkot, another afternoon bar mitzvah and then, later that evening, a wedding.

Wow! What a roller coaster. Yes indeed, so many highs and lows. I'm not one for roller coasters, I don't like them and if I have a choice, I don't get on them. However, with five children, there's always someone who wants to get on one. Then my wife and I give each other the look. You know the look – the one that says “I'm not going – you go,” and I get stuck. So, if I'm forced to board anything that even resembles a roller coaster, I hold on for dear life. I'm a true white knuckler. I'm not the kind that likes to take my hands off and enjoy the ride. For me, it's dreadful the entire time. So I hold on tight, to a bar and to a seatbelt or to whoever is sitting next to me. That's the message today – hold on tight. This week the New York Times ran the headline, *Economic Roller Coaster Ends with Whiplash.*” To which I say, hold on tight, we are in for a bumpy ride. These are fierce economic times and we all feel as though the rug has been pulled out from under us. Investments are going down while the prices of everyday items are going up. Real estate values are dropping. Retail stores are closing all around us. We are all feeling the pinch – and we are feeling helpless. We feel out of control.

This is nothing new for the conscious Jew, especially at this time of year. For those who have taken the message of the season and of the year seriously, we've been struggling with what this year will bring for some time now. Throughout the High Holidays, we have thought long and hard about the coming year and what we hope to construct in the next few months. We've also thought about how little control we really have. We have prayed for life and prosperity, all the while knowing we have little impact on what will happen. We hope our sincerity will impact our future, but we all know the frailty of life. Filled with phrases of who will live and who will die, when the liturgy of the High Holidays isn't quite enough to shock our systems into a sincere return to a reliance on God, then the holiday of Sukkot arrives and, once again, it shows us our physical susceptibility.

The holiday of Sukkot instructs us to go outside, “Build booths and live in them.” If you think you have built a house that cannot be blown down, then go outside and build a more tenuous structure. You will immediately realize how vulnerable you are. The holiday of Sukkot teaches us how to live while not knowing what will happen next. The holiday of Sukkot prepares us for the unknown and when we practice living this way, our response changes. Sukkot teaches us to practice being vulnerable so, if and when it actually happens, we will be prepared. Our actions are rarely random. We all embrace patterns of behavior and habits of mind that shape what we do

in a given situation. We can practice a pattern of living and relying on each other and on God, rather than the buildings we build or the bank accounts we have. Sukkot asks us not to own stock but to take stock. Take stock of the people in our lives and take stock of the depth of our commitment to each other and to God.

One of the great customs of Sukkot is *Ushpizin*. In this custom, we invite people from our ancient past to join us in the Sukkah. Simply by just being there, these individuals enhance our celebration. In 2005, there was a great movie released by the same name. *Ushpizin*, was a powerful movie about Moshe and Mali Bellanga who are an impoverished, childless, Hasidic *baalei teshuva* ("returnees to Judaism") couple in the Breslov community in Jerusalem. They cannot pay their bills and, after Moshe is passed over for a stipend he expected, they are much less prepared for the upcoming Jewish holiday of Sukkot. Moshe admires a particularly beautiful *etrog*, or citron, one of the four species required for the holiday observance. They console themselves by recalling a saying of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, that difficult times are a test of faith. After some anguished prayer, on the eve of the holiday, they receive an unexpected gift that solves their financial problems so Moshe buys the *etrog* for 1000 shekels (about U.S. \$223 in 2004). However, they are visited by a pair of escaped convicts, one of whom knew Moshe in his earlier, non-religious life. The convicts become their guests (*ushpizin*) in the sukkah, creating many conflicts and straining Moshe and Mali's relationship. Ultimately, that is the point of the movie. It's not about an *etrog*, it's not about money, it isn't even about people's pasts, it is about being there for one another.

There's a wonderful piece of Gemara we recite every morning after we thank God for giving us the Torah. *Elu d'varim she'adam ochel pairoteihem ba'olam hazeh*. "These are the deeds that yield immediate fruit." Say our rabbis, "There are things we can do now that will have an immediate return on our investment." In this time of economic uncertainty, we're talking about investments and what are the best investments. Our tradition reminds us that financial investments pale in comparison to the investments we make in one another. The Gemara teaches a couple of mitzvot which give us an immediate return. *Kibud av v'eim* – honor your parents. *Gemilut Hasidim* – acts of kindness. *Hashkamat beit hamidrash*- attending to a house of study, *hachnasat orchim* – welcoming guests. *Bikkur holim* – visiting the sick and *hava'at shalom ben adam l'chaveiro* – making peace between one another.(Shabbat 127a) Our sages give us a five point plan for building connections and prioritizing our interpersonal associations; They tell us *Kibud av v'eim*, honor your parents. We all have trouble with family members. It is sometimes hard to get along but family is important.

*Gemilut Hasidim* – acts of kindness – sometimes we just have to decide that no matter how hard life seems to be and no matter what kind of struggle in which we are engaged, just being nice is significant.

*Hachnasat orchim* - welcoming guests – we can be surprised by the interesting people that are around us. Getting to know them by opening our homes to them can create a bond. Opening your home to others is essential.

*Bikkur holim* - visiting the sick – illness is isolating – visiting people when they are alone and

most vulnerable can ease that pain. Reaching out to someone who is suffering is vital.

*Hashkamat beit hamidrash* – attending to a house of study. We all need a place to go. We need a place where we feel welcome and safe. Our Rabbi says, “Those places need attention. Setting aside time to do that holy work is imperative.”

Sometimes we make investments in people and some of those investments yield unexpected or sometimes expected disappointments, while others exceed our expectations. There are people to whom we give so much and yet we find ourselves unsatisfied with the result, while there are those with whom we are pleasantly surprised by the way they have enhanced our lives. The Talmud reminds us that although there will always be people who let us down, that is not the rule but the exception. People are worth the investment.

People often remark how hard my job seems as I have to carry the pain of so many but there is also great benefit that comes from these moments. Some of my greatest teachers are those who have passed away and whose lives I hear about only after they're gone. I had an argument this week with a friend. Then I went to meet with a family about an upcoming funeral and the story they told me immediately made me realize how petty this argument was. It was a story I shared at the funeral but it is certainly worth repeating today. Fluerette Kurtzman shared a story about her mother. When it was time for Fluerette to go off to college, she wanted to go to a college in Boston. Her father had suggested that, like her older brothers, maybe she ought to attend a school closer to home so that they would be able to save on room and board. Her response was that she was not a child of the depression like her older brothers, but a child of prosperity. Her brothers were much older than she. She was a child of prosperity, not only because of the time period when she was born, but because she understood the value of family. Fleurette was the glue that held the family together. She was the one who made the holidays, she was the one who invited everyone and she was the one who learned to play tennis so she could spend more time with her husband and children. She was the one who volunteered in the Gift Shop so she could make more connections with people. She was the one who made connections with people everywhere she went. Ultimately, Fluerette was a child of prosperity and so are we, especially when we decide that people are more important than dollars, kindness more valuable than money.

A strange phenomenon occurred this past week – the holiday of Sukkot cancels shiva. The joy of the community overrides the sorrow of the individual. However, it meant there were people in our community who were robbed of their opportunity to be surrounded by their community in their hour of need. Yet the community reached out to them. Another family who also lost their grandmother, mother and wife came to our home for dinner on yontiff. We knew their pain. We understood their loss and in the safety of our sukkah we said Kiddush, made motzi, and gently talked. We shared our lives and for a few hours we were a really good distraction. They were interesting and the conversation was comforting.

These are difficult economic times, but we have to hold on to something. I suggest what we ought to hold on to is each other.